Over the last few months, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka has made a number of high-level appointments that indicate “Belarusianisation” of the government.

A number of new military chiefs never studied at Russian military schools in contrast to most of their peers. Certain candidates known to speak Belarusian on a daily basis also received positions, for example the rector for Mahilioŭ State University (Lukashenka’s alma mater), the Information Minister and the Deputy Foreign Minister.

This policy is intended to strengthen the country’s independence and national identity. It differs from Lukashenka’s traditional approach to policy insofar that it is not purely statist and adds a cultural element to Belarusian nation-building.

On 18 July, President Lukashenka appointed Alieh Dvihaliou to be the Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee. Until then he was the commander of the Air Force and Air Defense of the Armed Forces of Belarus. Like his predecessor Siarhiej Hurulioŭ and many other high-rank Belarusian siloviki, personnel who oversee state security and power ministries, he was born in Russia. But unlike most of them, he
received his full military education and pursued his career in Belarus.

According to military establishment sources for Naša Niva, a Belarusian newspaper, Alieh Dvihalioŭ casts the impression of being an “intellectual,” a “patriot,” and an “expert in military equipment.” According to the Belarusian military expert Aliaksandr Aliesin, he is a competent manager and technical expert. By his appointment, the leadership is expressing their view that the military-industrial sector needs modern managers, rather than regular military men at the top.

The 49-year old Ihar Holub, who is Dvihalioŭ’s former deputy,
replaced Dvihalioŭ as commander of the Air Force and Air Defense. Holub, too, appears to be part of the new wave of officers. He was born in Ukraine and has also never studied in Russia. This serves as further evidence that Lukashenka is pursuing a policy of removing Russia-affiliated siloviki from high positions and replacing them with those loyal to Belarus’s independence. The Belarusian leader seems to have taken notice of Ukraine’s predicament, whereby many high-level officers turned out to be Russian agents after the ousting of Yanukovych.

Along with this trend, special and military services saw a number of shakeups after abuses were revealed to the president. On 13 October, Lukashenka removed all acting heads for the Operations and Analysis Centre—the government agency responsible for information security—until an audit of its practices had been completed. The nature of their offences has yet to be revealed.

At the same time, a number of military officers are under criminal investigation after outrageous acts of hazing led to the death of a soldier in a Minsk region military unit. New officer appointments may follow as more facts of army hazing emerge.

**University rectors: ‘healthy nationalism’ instead of dissent**

At the end of September, Lukashenka changed a number of rectors. Andrej Karol, 44, became Rector of Belarusian State University, considered the top-ranked university in Belarus. Previously he was rector of Hrodna State University. Lukashenka, appointing him, mentioned that, “We need to establish order at BSU and... take it to a new level.”
The new rector is not respected within civil society. During his tenure, purges of dissenting academics continued unabated at Hrodna University. He came from a peripheral university, did not demonstrate any high achievements as a prominent scholar or manager. On the other hand, he does seem to have a knack for carrying out decisions issued from higher-up.

Dzianis Duk at Mahilioŭ State University. Photo: mogilev-region.gov.by

Another notable appointment came to Lukashenka’s own alma mater—Mahilioŭ State University. The position of University Rector was granted to Dzianis Duk, a 40-year-old historian and archaeologist and previous vice-rector of Polack State University.

People who know him personally call him a “serious researcher,” an “outstanding person and scholar.” Interestingly, Lukashenka highly praised a joint work written by Duk and Volha Liaŭko, The Origins of Belarusian Statehood: Polack and Viciebsk Lands in the 9th–18th Centuries. He characterised their approach to history as a “healthy nationalism.”
Last but not least, Duk speaks Belarusian in his daily life, which is quite rare among Belarusian officials. Lukashenka, who received his historical education at Mahilioŭ State University and always praises his teachers, may want to revitalise historical studies there—the most important part of this rejuvenation being a “healthy nationalism.”

**Information and foreign affairs – growing Belarusianisation**

The appointment of Aliaksandr Karliukievič as the new Information Minister on 28 September continued this trend of Belarusianisation within the establishment. Karliukievič worked as deputy information minister this past year, and before that he headed the Literature and Art state holding (2006-2011) and the newspaper and publishing house Zviazda (2011-2016). Although he has always been on the official side of the cultural community, he represents a definitively patriotic part of the establishment, which is clear from speeches he has made on TV. Last but not least, he always speaks Belarusian in the media.

This August, Andrej Dapkiunas was appointed Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Prior to that, he served as Permanent Representative of Belarus to the United Nations, and was replaced by another Deputy Foreign Minister Valiancin Rybakou. Dapkiunas has remained a little known, but interesting personality in the Belarusian government. He shares kinship with the great 20th century Belarusian poet, Janka Kupala, and his parents were high-level cultural officials in Soviet Belarus.
In 2011, Lukashenka recalled the diplomat from New York. The authorities suspected him of having links with opposition presidential candidate Andrej Sannikaŭ. Allegedly, Dapkiunas’s embassy colleagues had tipped Belarusian authorities off. He had to undergo interrogation at the KGB headquarters in Minsk, but managed to prove his innocence and returned to New York.

At his first speech before parliament this October, Dapkiunas persistently spoke Belarusian, even when deputies asked him questions in Russian. This behaviour has seldom taken place in parliament—if ever at all. However, former Belarusian diplomat Igar Gubarevich told Belarus Digest that Dapkiunas’s high professionalism might also have been a strong contributor to his appointment, while his position on Belarusian language use played a more minor role.

The above mentioned appointments in military, information, education and foreign affairs ministries indicate that Lukashenka is pursuing a firm strategy of Belarusianisation of
the government. The strategy is intended to strengthen the country’s independence. What differs it from his previous policies is an emphasis on a statist, but rather on a cultural approach to nation-building. Therefore, this could become a major shift in the shaping of Belarusian statehood.